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A.I.D.S.: DEEPENING OUR FAITH AS GAY & LESBIAN CHRISTIANS

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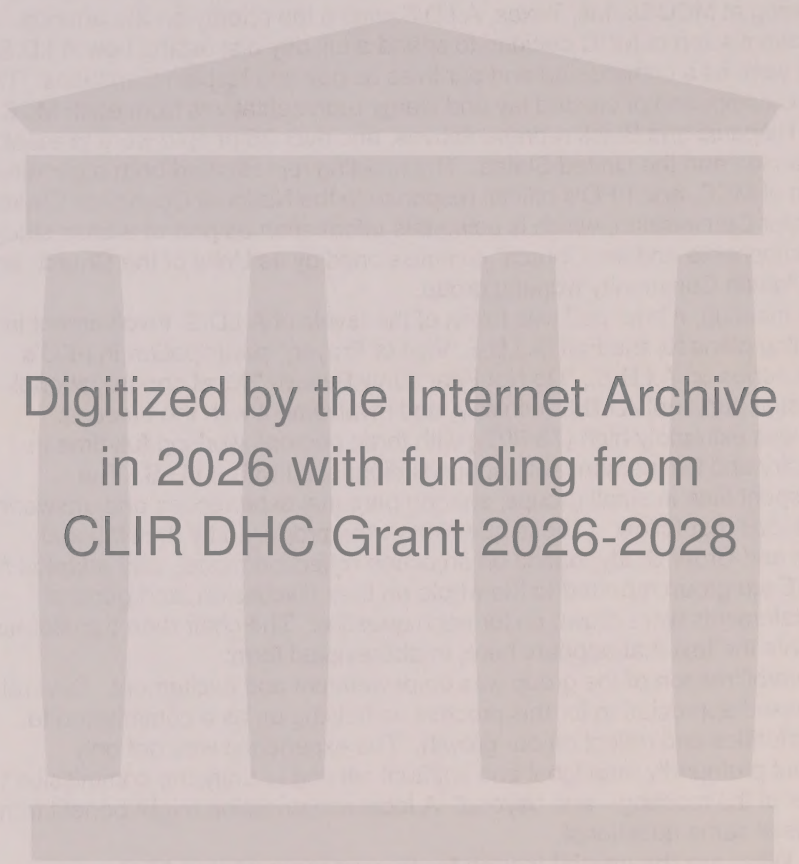
When the Faith, Fellowship and Order Commission (FFO) of UFMCC, convened its 1986 meeting at MCC Dallas, Texas, A.I.D.S. was a top priority on the agenda. The theological commission of MCC decided to spend a full day discussing how A.I.D.S. is affecting our work as a commission and our lives as gay and lesbian Christians. The commission is comprised of elected lay and clergy representatives from each MCC district, plus Hispanic and Black representatives, and over 25 people were present from Denmark, Canada and the United States. The meeting represented both a genuine cross section of MCC, and FFO's official response to the National Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission, which is using this information as part of a case study on "A.I.D.S., Homophobia and the Church" commissioned by its Unity of the Church and Renewal of Human Community working group.

At the meeting, a brief poll was taken of the levels of A.I.D.S. involvement in the group, including plans for the Fall "A.I.D.S. Vigil of Prayer," participation in FFO's Lenten study series on A.I.D.S., "Do Not Fear, Only Believe," local congregational A.I.D.S. ministry, personal A.I.D.S. ministry, and involvement with the disease. Involvement was extremely high (75-80%) with three persons working full-time in A.I.D.S. ministry and two persons with spouses diagnosed with A.I.D.S. The commission spent time in small groups, sharing personal experiences and answering the four questions that follow. (These questions were proposed by the National Council Faith and Order Study, based on an action-reflection model, and adapted for FFO's use.) Each group reported to the whole on their discussion, and general consensus statements were drawn up for each question. The chair then transformed these notes into the text that appears here, in abbreviated form:

The overall reason of the group was empowerment and excitement. Several people expressed appreciation for this process as helping us as a commission to refocus our priorities and reflect on our growth. The experience was not only intellectual, but profoundly emotional and spiritual serving to unify the commission for the remainder of the meeting-- and beyond! A local congregation might benefit from discussing these same questions!

- 1. What are the crucial issues for human renewal that FFO was designed to address and how have these changed in response to A.I.D.S.?**

FFO was formed around the following issues: a) Recognition of a split between mind and body, spirituality and sexuality, in our culture and in Christianity, and a need to heal that brokenness in embodied wholeness, the "embodiment" of God in ALL of us-- mind, body and spirit. b) Growth toward self-acceptance as gays and lesbians, toward a sex positive attitude in the face of culture's sex negativity and homophobia



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(the fear of homosexuality). c) The goal of building consensus for UFMCC's statement of faith from an ecumenical perspective. d) Empowering the laity in a commission of lay-clergy parity, as "the priesthood of all believers" where "we are all theologians."

Changes in these issues in response to A.I.D.S. have primarily been to make them much more intense, more real, more personal. Issues of sexuality, of embodiment, of homophobia are all heightened by the A.I.D.S. crisis. Part of that homophobia has been facing the specific question of A.I.D.S. and God's judgment and writing a statement in response (The 1985 FFO brochure, "Is A.I.D.S. God's Judgment? A Christian View of Faith, Hope and Love from Metropolitan Community Church"). The other major change is an increased focus on questions of evil, suffering and death, and an affirmation of resurrection, healing and life in response. There is a profound sense of spiritual strength and of deepening and affirmation of faith and life.

2. What were the theological or faith assumptions operative in FFO's formation and how have these changed in response to A.I.D.S.?

Theological assumptions reflect MCC's context as an ecumenical church with a ministry in the gay and lesbian community. The assumption is that sexuality is a gift of God and homosexuality is not sinful. Other assumptions relate to process: Theology is based in experience as the primary source of revelation, supported by scripture and tradition. Theology is a journey, a process, an evolving. Theology assumes an acceptance of diversity: "Many paths, one faith in Christ."

Changes in these theological assumptions reflect the intensifying effect of A.I.D.S. Theology must be relational, personalized. Worship, prayer and praise are essential in doing theology. The importance of the wholistic health and healing movements has increased as they interact with our faith. There is also a perceived need for increased consensus and affirmation of our faith. Some felt the need for a more concise faith statement. Others focused on "not wasting our time on disagreements" and "getting on with essentials." In one sense, these changes are about living out the experiential, personal focus of the commission.

3. With what understanding or attitude toward the church did FFO begin? What is it now, and what about the A.I.D.S. crisis caused it to change or remain the same?

FFO began with an understanding that "WE are the church, we are the People of God," and is about "articulating the experience of God moving through an oppressed people." The church's ministry is one of reconciliation and healing. The A.I.D.S. crisis has intensified that bond. We have moved beyond a bonding around sexuality to a bonding around mortality, claiming resurrection, healing and life in the face of evil, suffering and death. Facing death has made us take ourselves more seriously as the church, take more responsibility and activism in our community. Someone said, "We are the experts now; we are healing the physically and spiritually wounded of the other churches." Person after person testified about MCC being sought for its pastoral expertise in this crisis. Out of this comes an increased intensity and focus on the ministry of reconciliation and healing.

4. What church dividing or uniting issues have arisen in your work around A.I.D.S. and how have you sought to address them?

Discussing this questions was especially helpful, because some issues had not been clearly raised before as sources of division, and of potential unity as they are confronted and worked through. The interrelation of sin and sickness and their relationship with faith and healing are primary issues that can divide congregations, including everything from blaming and judgmental attitudes to disillusion when faithful prayer does not result in physical healing. Issues of sexual morality as divisive, rooted in internalized homophobia and horizontal violence (taking our self-hatred out on each other). Division between gay men, who are the highest risk group for A.I.D.S. and lesbians, who are the lowest risk group, is an issue in some congregations., with women especially fearful of A.I.D.S. one more time focusing their issues on men instead of women's concerns. It is also true that women and men are learning to work together and support each other across these differences in ways not possible before A.I.D.S. is seen as both bringing greater conflict in our churches (in grief, fear and stress reactions) and as bring greater commitment. The grief reactions of denial and anger bring conflict, but facing death also brings commitment and faith.

Racism is a divisive issue in our congregations and our communities. One person of color called this the Cain syndrome-- "You caused it." As increasing numbers of Black people are diagnosed with A.I.D.S., the lack of outreach in the Black community by MCC congregations is increasingly a stumbling block to ministry, but also an incentive for greater involvement in those communities. Another issue is increased awareness of drug abuse and alcoholism in the gay community and the need to directly address these problems in response to A.I.D.S. as one person pointed out, "More gays die of alcoholism each year than they do of A.I.D.S."

A more specific area of conflict is the negotiation of priorities for ministry in local congregations, as pastors and laity spend increasing energy with A.I.D.S. work-- both in pastoral care, education and advocacy-- and other issues receive less time. One comment was that A.I.D.S. is intensifying the need to deal with ongoing community pastoral issues such as sexuality, drug use, alcoholism, racism, and sexism, but at times can be perceived as taking away from ministry in these areas. Others see A.I.D.S. ministry helping us deal more effectively with all of these issues.

Out responses to these diverse diving and uniting issues are hopeful. We strongly agree that we face death with deepening faith, and this faith helps us heal the divisions. FFO is responding with resources for education and skills in the process of reconciliation. And this ministry, as with all new ministries, helps our church to grow in maturity and faith as well as in numbers.

